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Moral Intuitions and Support for Immigration

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Attitudes toward immigration are often shaped by whether immigrants are perceived as a threat to one's racial, ethnic, or nativity group status. Yet recent research shows that such perceptions vary not only between different groups but also within them. Drawing on Moral Foundations Theory, our study investigates the moral intuitions that lead some individuals to view immigrants as threats and others to see them as deserving of care and support.

Methods: Using data from a national YouGov survey of 4000 US respondents, we examined the association between moral intuitions and attitudes toward immigration, including whether immigration should be a human right and support for higher levels of immigration.

Results: We find that people with strong *individualizing* intuitions—including those emphasizing care and fairness—are more likely to support immigration. In contrast, those with strong *binding* intuitions—especially those emphasizing a respect for authority and sanctity—are less supportive, likely reflecting concerns about maintaining the rule of law and apprehensions about outsiders.

Conclusion: These findings highlight the importance of moral frameworks in shaping public attitudes toward immigration. Differences in individualizing versus binding moral intuitions help explain why some individuals view immigrants primarily through a lens of care and fairness, while others emphasize social order and the importance of maintaining boundaries.

1 | Introduction

International migration is at a record high, with 6.5 million new global immigrants in 2023 (OECD 2024). Immigration is also one of the most contentious issues in international politics, and it has become the defining issue in populist movements in Western countries (Docquier and Rapoport 2025; Yilmaz 2012). What determines support and opposition to immigration policies? One of the leading theories is Group Threat Theory, which posits that people are more likely to develop negative views of immigrants when they perceive them as posing economic and cultural threats (Blumer 1958; Quillian 1995; Semyonov et al. 2006; Fussell 2014; Taniguchi 2021; Berg 2015). Because individuals regard their racial, ethnic, or nativity-based group membership as a central component of their identity, they tend to perceive threats directed at their group as personal threats (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Following this framework, most existing studies have centered around immigration attitudes among dominant group members (see Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014, for an extensive review). More recent work has turned attention to minority group members and, in some cases, directly compared both majority and minority populations (e.g., Gorodzeisky and Glikman 2018; Mustafa and Richards 2019). These comparative studies show that threat perceptions are not uniform even within race groups, suggesting significant variation among individuals who occupy similar group positions (e.g., Atac et al. 2025; Enos and Gidron 2018). This observed heterogeneity suggests that group position

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alone cannot fully explain attitudes toward immigration and raises the question of why some people are more likely to see immigration as threatening while others welcome it as part of a healthy society, and why parties on both sides interpret their view as morally justified. To begin addressing these questions, we examine a social-psychological factor that has been shown to be associated with a broad range of policy issues—*people's moral intuitions* (Haidt 2012; Koleva et al. 2012).

Moral intuitions are the result of gut-level judgments that precede and influence moral reasoning (Greene 2013; Haidt 2012). Some moral intuitions, termed *individualizing,* emphasize fairness and protecting others from harm (Silver et al. 2022). We would expect that people with strong individualizing intuitions would have a strong predisposition to support generous immigration policies. *Binding* intuitions, in contrast, emphasize the importance of maintaining social order and cohesion. Those with strong binding intuitions might be less likely to support immigration because it risks undermining social cohesion. These intuitions may help explain why some people are more likely than others to perceive immigrants as a threat.

While a few studies have examined the link between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes (Grover et al. 2019; McDonald and Ryan 2019; Captari et al. 2019; Nath et al. 2022), these studies have tended to use small, non-representative samples and/or examined a limited set of moral intuitions. Using US data from a national YouGov survey of 4000 respondents, we examine the association between moral intuitions and attitudes toward immigration, including whether immigration should be a human right and support for higher or lower levels of immigration. We further test if these moral intuitions operate independently of group position—and specifically whether their associations with immigration attitudes vary by nativity and race/ethnicity. In doing so, we aim to provide greater insight into polarization around immigration policy.

2 | Background

It has often been said that the United States is a nation of immigrants. In 2024, the United States had far more immigrants (52.4 million) than any other country (Germany was the second leading destination, with 16.8 million), though the share of the population that is foreign-born is lower in the United States than in many other nations (United Nations 2025). The number of immigrants in the United States has grown since the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965 that greatly eased immigration quotas. The share of the US population that is foreign-born has risen since 1970, and by 2023, it nearly matched the all-time high that was reached in the early 20th century (Migration Policy Institute 2025). Among the US foreign-born in 2023, 11.7 million were unauthorized immigrants, up from about 10.1 million in 2020, though slightly below the estimated all-time high of 12.0 million in 2008 (Warren 2024).

Immigration has long been a contentious issue internationally and in the United States. Many European countries adopted more restrictive policies over the past decade, in part as a response to a large inflow of refugees and asylees in the 2010s (Varma and Roehse 2024). In the United States, immigration featured prominently in Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, where he promised to reduce illegal immigration and build a wall along the US–Mexico border. He made the deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants a central theme in his successful 2024 reelection bid (Crowley 2024).

The American public is split in its support for immigration, and attitudes have varied over time. From 1965—the year Gallup first asked about immigration attitudes—until the early 1990s, the percentage of respondents favoring a reduction in levels of immigration increased from 33% to 65%. However, opposition to immigration fell thereafter, reaching a low of 28% in 2020—a year in which, for the first time, more Americans favored increasing immigration (34%) than decreasing it. However, the early 2020s saw an abrupt shift, such that by 2024, 55% supported a reduction in immigration, with only 16% favoring increases (Jones 2024).

2.1 | Determinants of Attitudes Toward Immigration

One of the most common theories proposed to explain attitudes toward immigration is Group Threat (Fussell 2014; Taniguchi 2021; Berg 2015). Originally applied to understanding racial prejudice, Group Threat Theory posits that prejudice among members of a dominant group occurs when its members perceive another group as a threat. According to Blumer (1958), the threat reinforces the dominant group's own identity and inspires feelings of superiority, a claim to special rights, status, and resources and is rooted in a fear and suspicion that the subordinate group seeks the rights and privileges that its own group has been accorded. Similarly, Blalock (1967) proposed that dominant groups discriminate as a reaction to economic and political threats from other groups. Drawing on Quillian (1995), migration scholars have used this framework to explore how established populations respond to immigration and have demonstrated that anti-immigrant attitudes often develop when immigrants are perceived as threatening the dominant group's political, economic, or racial standing (e.g., Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2016; Hawley 2011; Scheve and Slaughter 2001).

For example, group threat might be activated if immigrants are perceived as competing for the same jobs as native-born workers in a sluggish economy or if the native-born population grows to resent language accommodations in schools or at the ballot box (Fussell 2014; Chandler and Tsai 2001; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Malhotra et al. 2013). Along these lines, research has generally affirmed that subjective feelings of cultural and economic threat are associated with more support for restrictive immigration policies (Buckler et al. 2009; Citrin et al. 1997; Lu and Nicholson-Crotty 2010; Malhotra et al. 2013; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Kusow and DeLisi 2021; Hellwig and Sinno 2017).

But is group threat all that's involved? While Group Threat literature highlights how perceptions of intergroup competition and status anxiety shape attitudes, it tends to emphasize differences between majority and minority populations or between native- and foreign-born residents. However, recent studies show that within majority and minority groups, threat responses are often far from uniform as individuals exposed to the same structural

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conditions vary widely in whether they interpret immigration in positive or negative terms (e.g., Atac et al. 2025; Enos and Gidron 2018). This within-group heterogeneity suggests that threat perceptions are likely more than just a function of group position (Levy and Wright 2020).

One under-studied theory that might help explain this heterogeneity is Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). MFT proposes that people have moral intuitions about how the world should work and what makes for a good, functioning society. There are two broad types of moral intuitions: *individualizing* intuitions emphasize avoiding harm and ensuring fair treatment of others, especially the vulnerable; while *binding* intuitions focus on preserving the order, stability, and cohesion of social groups (Silver et al. 2022; Iceland et al. 2023). These intuitions emerged in humans in response to adaptive challenges in our evolutionary past (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt et al. 2009). Specifically, individualizing intuitions have evolutionary roots in parental care and kin altruism. Humans are unique in how long infants remain dependent on their parents. Without an innate drive to provide care, humans would not have survived. Binding intuitions emerged to enhance cohesion and cooperation—both essential for communities to flourish. In pre-modern times, survival depended on cooperation to hunt, defend territory, and share resources. Without strong group bonds and trusted leadership, our ancestors would not have been able to survive hardship and external threats to their safety.

Individuals and groups differ in the strength of these intuitions in part due to heritable variation but also largely because of social learning (Graham et al. 2009). Parents impart values to their children, and cultures vary in the extent to which they promote different cultural norms. Graham et al. (2013), for instance, describe how "children in traditional Hindu households are frequently required to bow, often touching their heads to the floor or to the feet of revered elders and guests. Bowing is used in religious contexts as well, to show deference to the gods…Note that this knowledge is not just factual knowledge—it includes feelings and motor schemas for bowing and otherwise showing deference." In this example, then, traditional Hindu culture promotes binding moral intuitions.

MFT further describes how five basic moral foundations are the building blocks of individualizing and binding intuitions. The individualizing domain includes two of these: the *care* foundation, which is rooted in the evolutionary challenge of child rearing, "makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need" and "makes us despise cruelty and want to care for those who are suffering" (Haidt 2012,153); and the *fairness* foundation, which is rooted in the evolutionary challenge of forming cooperative non-kin relationships, "makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism," and "makes us want to shun or punish cheaters" (Haidt 2012,153).

The binding domain includes three constituent intuitions: *loyalty*, which is rooted in the evolutionary challenge of forming cohesive groups, emphasizes loyalty to nations, families, interest groups, and teams and "makes us sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player" (Haidt 2012,154); *authority*, which is rooted in the evolutionary challenge of maintaining functioning hierarchies, "makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position" (Haidt 2012,154); and *sanctity*, which is rooted in the evolutionary challenge of strengthening groups by encouraging reverence toward sacred totems, makes "people feel that some things, actions, and people are noble, pure, and elevated; [while] others are base, polluted, and degraded" (Haidt 2012, 174).[1]

Moral principles help predict how people respond to political appeals beyond cost–benefit reasoning (McDonald and Ryan 2019; Ryan 2019). Moral intuitions have been shown to help predict attitudes toward many polarizing issues, ranging from affirmative action to vaccine hesitancy to policing (Iceland et al. 2023a, 2023b; Silver et al. 2022).

Immigration is also one of those issues that activates strong moral convictions among those who disagree about it, in part because different attitudes often reflect different moral commitments (Grover et al. 2019; McDonald and Ryan 2019). For instance, political scientist Kukathas (2004, 380), in making the case for open borders, argued that: "[One] reason for favoring open borders is a principle of humanity. The great majority of the people of the world live in poverty, and for a significant number of them the most promising way of improving their condition is to move … To say to such people that they are forbidden to cross a border in order to improve their condition is to say to them that it is justified that they be denied the opportunity to get out of poverty, or even destitution."

The Heritage Foundation (2021) also uses moralizing language in stating its opposition to generous immigration policies and especially illegal immigration: "Every nation has the right, recognized by both international and domestic law, to secure its borders and ports of entry and control what and who is coming into its country. A disorganized and chaotic immigration system encourages people to go around the law and is a clear invitation to those who wish to take advantage of our openness to harm the nation. Secure borders, especially in a time of terrorist threat, are crucial to American national security."

Notably, these viewpoints reference alternative—individualizing and binding—moral concerns. Kakuthas's support for open borders draws upon the two individualizing intutions—care and fairness. He invokes the importance of improving people's material condition, which exemplifies the concern with care, and providing people with opportunities, which signifies a concern with fairness. In contrast, the Heritage Foundation emphasizes binding intuitions, with references to concerns of authority (international and domestic law), sanctity (the need to combat "terrorist threat"—or external threats), and loyalty—to American security interests.

It is important to note that we are not suggesting MFT replace Group Threat Theory. Rather, we see moral intuitions as helping explain why group threat is more acutely activated among some individuals rather than others of similar socio-demographic backgrounds. In other words, moral intuitions might help answer the question of why two otherwise similar people might possess very different attitudes toward immigration.

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More specifically, group threat—or the prejudice that arises as groups perceive threats to their social position in relation to others—is closely linked to binding moral intuitions. Through socialization, some individuals and groups develop stronger binding intuitions, which can heighten their sensitivity to perceived threats to the collective, while others remain less affected (Nath et al. 2022).

Conversely, cosmopolitanism, which is indicative of low levels of group threat and which has been linked to pro-immigration attitudes (Fussell 2014; Taniguchi 2021; Berg 2015), likely reflects weaker binding intuitions and stronger individualizing intuitions. Finally, some research has linked humanitarianism (which is also conceptually associated with low levels of group threat) to pro-immigration attitudes (Pantoja 2006; see also Levy and Wright 2020). These values likely reflect high levels of individualizing intuitions among respondents. MFT should thus be viewed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, Group Threat Theory by explaining why group threat is activated among some individuals but not others.

In the current study, we distinguish conceptually between the roles of group threat and moral intuitions in explaining attitudes toward immigration by examining whether moral intuitions operate similarly across different race and nativity groups, while also controlling for other important attributes that might be associated with attitudes toward immigration, such as socioeconomic status and political ideology. If moral intuitions are associated with immigration attitudes across these groups, it would suggest that such intuitions are important independent of group position. By group position, we refer specifically to racial/ethnic groups and nativity groups that have different statuses within the society (e.g., Bobo and Hutchings 1996), which may in turn produce different attitudes toward immigration.

Only a few studies have directly examined the link between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes. Grover et al. (2019), analyzing 2016 Twitter posts, found that pro-immigration tweets referenced harm and fairness (individualizing intuitions) and loyalty (a binding intuition), while anti-immigration tweets emphasized authority (also a binding intuition). However, the study used a non-representative sample and indirect measures of moral intuitions. Captari et al. (2019) found that care and fairness predicted more favorable views of Syrian refugees, though the study focused narrowly on xenophobia, included only two moral intuitions, and relied on a non-representative MTurk sample. Dražanová and Ruhs (2025), in a working paper focusing on procedural and distributive fairness of asylum policies in Italy and Germany, found that individualizing moral intuitions was associated with favoring procedural safeguards in such policies, while binding moral intuitions was associated with distributive fairness that aligns with national interests. McDonald and Ryan (2019) found care associated with permissive immigration views and loyalty with restrictive views but used an abbreviated moral intuition scale and omitted key controls, such as political ideology. Our study builds on theirs by including a broader range of moral foundations (the two summary intuitions—binding and individualizing—and the five constituent intuitions—loyalty, authority, sanctity, harm, and fairness), key attitudinal covariates (e.g., political ideology), a much larger national sample (N = 4000 vs. 894). Finally, we go beyond prior research by engaging with group threat approaches and examining whether moral intuitions operate independently of group position—that is, whether they operate similarly across different racial/ethnic and nativity groups.

2.2 | Current Study

We use a large national sample to measure the association between moral intuitions—including the two general domains (individualizing and binding) and the constituent moral foundations (care, fairness, authority, loyalty and sanctity)—and a wide range of possibly confounding controls, including sociodemographic characteristics and political ideology.

We hypothesize that individualizing moral intuitions—and the two constituent intuitions (care and fairness)—will be associated with less support for immigration restriction (H1), since support for immigration is often justified on humanitarian grounds (Pantoja 2006). Immigration provides economic opportunities for people who lack them in their home country, and safety for those fleeing political persecution (Castles et al. 2003; Carling 2024). Those with strong care intuitions—which include compassion and empathy—may be more likely to support providing help to immigrants seeking a better life. Those with strong fairness intuitions may be likely to support providing opportunities to people to improve their current circumstances.

We hypothesize that binding moral intuitions—and the three constituent intuitions (sanctity, authority, and loyalty)—will be associated with more support for immigration restriction (H2). Those who seek to restrict immigration often do so because they feel that it poses a threat—either economic or cultural—to the native-born population and its way of life (e.g., Fussell 2014; Malhotra et al. 2013). Unauthorized immigration is also thought to violate a rules-based order (Mortensen 2012; Wright et al. 2016). These concerns may tap into the constituent binding intuitions including sanctity, as immigrants are often viewed as culturally different and disruptive to the social order; authority, which features the importance of following rules; and loyalty, which is associated with a heightened concern for in-group members (Grover et al. 2019).

Finally, we hypothesize that moral intuitions will play a similar role in explaining attitudes toward immigration among a variety of groups who, due to their social position, might otherwise respond differently due to the threat potentially posed by immigration (H3). Specifically, we examine differences in immigration attitudes by nativity and race/ethnicity.

We include two measures of immigration attitudes: one assessing respondents' preferences for changing immigration levels, and another asking whether immigration should be considered a human right. We hypothesize that moral intuitions will be associated with both, but more strongly with the second item, as its moralistic framing may be more likely to activate respondents' moral emotions. In other words, opinions on whether immigration should be increased or decreased might be answered based on a respondents' dispassionate view of whether immigration is a net economic boon or loss—rather than on a moral judgment that immigration is morally "good" or "bad." In contrast, the question

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of whether immigration is a human right directly invokes moral judgment on the goodness of having an expansive immigration policy more generally and may therefore be more likely to elicit a moralistic response.

3 | Data and Methods

We use data from a national survey of 4000 US adults conducted in July 2023 by YouGov, a leading academic survey research firm. It included an oversample of African American, Latino, and Asian American adults (1000 of each, in addition to 1000 White adults). YouGov uses model-based sampling approach to produce weighted samples that generalize to the adult US population (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014; Sanders et al. 2007; Simmons and Bobo 2015). Our sample was derived from YouGov interviews of 4418 respondents drawn from its online panel of 2 million US residents. Of these, 4000 were matched to a stratified sample drawn from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample to represent the target population of US adults using a propensity score function that included age, gender, education, and region.

The demographic characteristics of our sample approximate those of the 2019 adult US population. Following is a comparison of our sample with the ACS, with the latter in parentheses (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a, 2019b): non-Hispanic White, 64.0% (60.0%); non-Hispanic Black 12.4% (12.4%); non-Hispanic Asian 5.9% (5.6%); Hispanic 16.9% (18.4%); female, 51.3% (50.8%); bachelor's degree or more, 30.8% (33.1%); and currently married, 43.0% (47.6%).

We measured respondents' attitudes toward immigration with two items that asked whether respondents prefer lower levels of immigration and whether immigration should be a human right. The first item was measured with the following question: "In your opinion, should LEGAL immigration be kept at its current level, increased, or decreased?" We code responses ordinally, where 1 = decreased, 2 = present level, and 3 = increased. The second item was measured with the following question: "Immigration to the United States should be a human right for all people." Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). We recoded this variable so that higher values reflect more positive attitudes toward immigration as a human right.

We measure *moral intuitions* using the 30-item Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ-30) shown in the Appendix. The MFQ has been widely used and validated (see Graham et al. 2011b, for extended discussions of items and survey reliability). Graham et al. (2011b) also used comparative model fitting and confirmatory factor analyses to provide empirical justification for a five-factor structure of moral concerns. The individualizing moral intuitions scale was calculated as the mean of 12 items in the care and fairness foundations (in our survey, alpha = 0.79). The binding moral intuitions scale was calculated as the mean of the 18 items in the loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations (alpha = 0.89). The correlation between the individualizing and binding moral intuitions scales is 0.31, consistent with prior research (Niemi and Young 2016; Iceland et al. 2023a).

Our analysis controls for a range of variables that might be correlated with immigration attitudes. Among these are political ideology, consisting of self-identification as liberal, moderate, conservative, or not sure. Previous research has indicated that conservative ideology and political parties are associated with support for immigrant restrictions, especially in places with high levels of immigration (Hawley 2011; Tichenor 2002; Buckler et al. 2009; Berg 2015). We include a variable for race/ethnicity, measured using five dummy variables: non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, non-Hispanic of other races (including those who marked more than one race), and Hispanic.[2] Race and ethnicity are often correlated with support for immigration, with Whites more likely to support restrictions than Latinos and Asians, since a substantial proportion of the latter groups are first- or second-generation immigrants. Whites are also more likely to support restrictions than African Americans, who might have more affinity with other demographic minority groups (Smeltz et al. 2023; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Sanderson et al. 2021; Buckler et al. 2009). Similarly, we control for nativity status, as native-born people are more likely to favor immigration restrictions than immigrants (Card et al. 2005).

We include a control for education with dummy variables for no high school, high school only, some college, BA degree, and post-graduate. Education tends to be negatively associated with anti-immigrant policies, as those with higher levels of education perceive less threat or competition from immigrants and because they tend to hold more cosmopolitan attitudes (Haubert and Fussell 2006; Pryce 2018; Dražanová et al. 2024; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010). Additional controls in our models include: age; female; total annual household income, coded from 1 = less than $10K to 13 = $200K and above; and residential urbanicity, coded from 1 = rural area to 5 = big city.

3.1 | Analytical Approach

After presenting descriptive statistics, we estimate the relationship between the two broad moral intuition domains—individualizing and binding—and immigration attitudes. We then examine the association between the five constituent moral foundations and immigration attitudes to see which are the most important predictors (these set of analyses test H1 and H2). Finally, we see if the association between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes vary by nativity and race/ethnicity to test if the intuitions operate similarly or differently across groups (H3). We use OLS regression for the immigration as a human right variable and ordinal logistic regression for the legal immigration level variable.[3] Logistic regression models predicting support for either increasing or decreasing immigration produced results similar to those from the ordinal logistic model. To address the 12% of respondents with missing income data and the one to two respondents with missing data on three of the moral intuitions variables, we applied multiple imputation (M = 10 datasets), incorporating all other independent variables from the analysis. Supplemental analyses using listwise deletion produced comparable results. We do not impute responses for three cases with missing data on one of our dependent variables—support for more or less immigration. We use the YouGov sample weight in all analyses.

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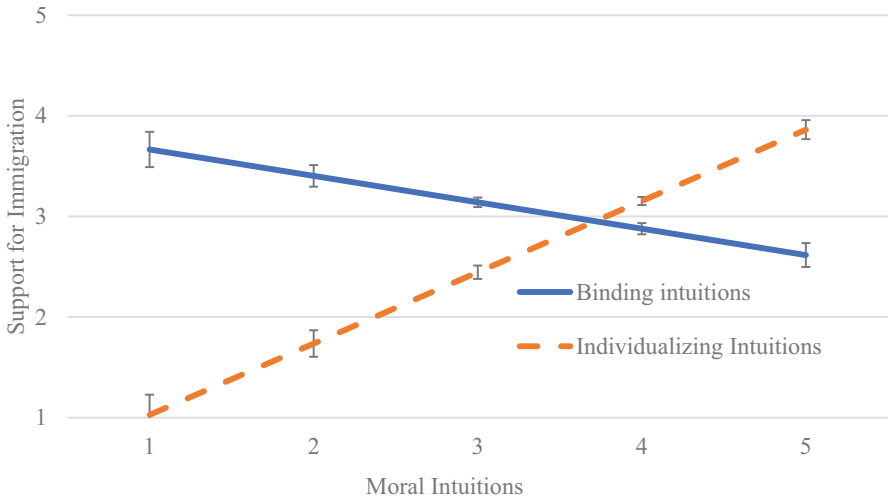


FIGURE 1 | Support for immigration as a human right by moral intuitions.

4 | Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the sample. The mean for support for immigration as a human right is 3.0 on a five-point scale. Nearly 42% of respondents preferred to keep immigration levels as they were, a quarter wanted to increase immigration, and just over a third wanted to decrease it. Respondents tended to score higher on individualizing intuitions than binding ones, with a high for care and fairness (both 3.8 on a five-point scale), and a low for loyalty (3.1). The modal political ideology category was moderate, and there were slightly more conservatives than liberals.

Table 2 shows OLS regressions predicting support for immigration as a human right. Model 1 shows results when using the summary individualizing and binding moral intuition variables, while Model 2 shows results with the constituent intuitions to provide more detail on which specific dimensions within the summary individualizing and binding moral intuitions are most strongly associated with immigration attitudes. Results from Model 1 indicate that, consistent with H1 and H2, binding intuitions were negatively associated with support for immigration as a human right, while individualizing intuitions were positively associated with such support. In other words, people concerned with social order and cohesion (i.e., binding intuitions) are less likely to support immigration, while those concerned with fairness and reducing harm (i.e., individualizing intuitions) are more likely to support immigration. The magnitude of the association is greater for individualizing intuitions, where a one-point increase in such intuitions (on a five-point scale) is associated with a 0.71 increase in support for immigration as a human right (also on a five-point scale).

To provide a clearer sense of the magnitude of the coefficients, Figure 1 plots the marginal effects of binding and individualizing moral intuitions based on the results in Model 1. It illustrates that respondents who score higher on binding intuitions are *less* supportive of the notion of immigration as a human right. Conversely, those who score higher on individualizing intuitions are *more* supportive of immigration as a human right.

Among the constituent intuitions, authority and sanctity were negatively associated with support for immigration as a human right, supporting H2. That is, people who believe in the importance of respecting authority and traditions are less supportive of immigration. However, unexpectedly, loyalty was associated with greater support for immigration, which is not consistent with H2. This could be in part due to the relatively high correlation between loyalty and authority (0.62) and loyalty and sanctity (0.64), indicating possible collinearity, although the variance inflation factors (VIFs)—with a high of 2.7—are below the critical value of 4.0 typically employed to indicate multicollinearity problems (Fisher and Mason 1981). The bivariate correlation between loyalty and the dependent variable is weakly negative, and if authority and sanctity are omitted from the model, the association between loyalty and support for immigration as a human right is negative and nonsignificant. Both individualizing intuitions are positively associated with support for immigration, in support of H1, with similar levels of magnitude.

The associations between the control variables and support for immigration as a human right are as expected. Moderates and conservatives are less supportive of immigration than liberals. African Americans and Hispanics are more supportive of immigration than Whites. The native-born population is less supportive of immigration than the foreign-born. Age is negatively associated with support for immigration.

Table 3 shows the result of the ordered logistic regression with support for increasing levels of immigration as the dependent variable. The results are consistent with those in Table 2, with a couple of minor differences. As hypothesized, binding intuitions were negatively associated with support for increases in immigration, while individualizing intuitions were positively associated with such support. In other words, as before, people who place greater moral value on social order and group cohesion are less supportive of immigration, while those who place greater moral value on fairness and reducing harm are more supportive of immigration. Among the constituent moral intuitions, authority and sanctity were once again negatively associated with support for immigration, though, unlike in Table 2, the coefficient for

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TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

	Percent/mean	SD	Range	*N*
Immigration is a human right (5-point scale)	3.0	1.5	1–5	4000
Immigration levels				
Decreased	24.4		1–100	3997
Present level	41.8		1–100	3997
Increased	33.8		1–100	3997
Moral intuitions				
Binding	3.4	0.77	1–5	3998
Loyalty	3.1	0.79	1–5	3999
Authority	3.7	0.79	1–5	3999
Sanctity	3.4	0.96	1–5	4000
Individualizing	3.8	0.58	1 – 5	4000
Care	3.8	0.63	1–5	4000
Fairness	3.8	0.61	1–5	4000
Political ideology (%)				
Liberal	27.3		1–100	4000
Moderate	31.7		1–100	4000
Conservative	30.0		1–100	4000
Not sure	11.0		1–100	4000
Religion (%)				
Not religious	34.3		1–100	4000
Protestant	29.7		1–100	4000
Catholic	21.2		1–100	4000
Other religion	14.8		1–100	4000
Education				
Less than high school	4.8		1–100	4000
High school	34.2		1–100	4000
Some college	30.2		1–100	4000
BA	19.3		1–100	4000
Post-grad	11.4		1–100	4000
Income	6.3	3.5	1–13	3529
Race (%)				
Non-Hispanic White	64.0		1–100	4000
Non-Hispanic Black	12.4		1–100	4000
Non-Hispanic Asian	5.9		1–100	4000
Non-Hispanic other race	0.9		1–100	4000
Hispanic	16.9		1–100	4000
Native-born (%)	89.2		1–100	4000
Female (%)	51.3		1–100	4000
Age	48.0	17.8	18–92	4000
Urbanicity	3.8	1.1	1–5	3999

Source: 2023 YouGov survey.

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TABLE 2 | OLS regression predicting support for immigration as a human right.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coeff	**SE**		**Coeff**	**SE**	
Moral intuitions						
Binding	−0.26	0.05	***			
Loyalty				0.20	0.05	***
Authority				−0.37	0.06	***
Sanctity				−0.13	0.05	*
Individualizing	0.71	0.05	***			
Care				0.41	0.06	***
Fairness				0.33	0.06	***
Political ideology						
Liberal (omitted)						
Moderate	−0.51	0.07	***	−0.48	0.07	***
Conservative	−1.13	0.09	***	−1.07	0.09	***
Not sure	−0.40	0.10	***	−0.40	0.10	***
Religion						
Not religious (omitted)						
Protestant	−0.04	0.08		−0.04	0.08	
Catholic	0.14	0.08		0.12	0.08	
Other religion	0.14	0.09		0.11	0.09	
Education						
Less than high school	−0.02	0.16		−0.02	0.15	
High school	0.12	0.10		0.09	0.10	
Some college	0.05	0.09		0.05	0.09	
BA	0.10	0.09		0.11	0.09	
Post-grad (omitted)						
Income	−0.02	0.01	*	−0.02	0.01	
Race						
Non-Hispanic White (omitted)						
Non-Hispanic Black	0.36	0.07	***	0.41	0.07	***
Non-Hispanic Asian	0.14	0.08		0.14	0.08	
Non-Hispanic other race	−0.21	0.38		−0.22	0.36	
Hispanic	0.22	0.07	**	0.22	0.07	**
Native-born	−0.29	0.08	***	−0.25	0.08	**
Female	0.02	0.05		0.04	0.05	
Age	−0.01	0.00	***	−0.01	0.00	***
Urbanicity	0.06	0.03	*	0.06	0.03	*
Constant	2.41	0.29	***	2.42	0.29	***
N		4000			4000	

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

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TABLE 3 | Ordered logistic regression predicting support for increases in immigration.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coeff	**SE**		**Coeff**	**SE**	
Moral intuitions						
Binding	−0.64	0.08	***			
Loyalty				−0.02	0.08	
Authority				−0.47	0.10	***
Sanctity				−0.19	0.08	*
Individualizing	0.67	0.09	***			
Care				0.28	0.10	**
Fairness				0.43	0.10	***
Political ideology						
Liberal (omitted)						
Moderate	−0.49	0.12	***	−0.47	0.12	***
Conservative	−1.03	0.13	***	−0.99	0.13	***
Not sure	−0.54	0.17	**	−0.54	0.17	**
Religion						
Not religious (omitted)						
Protestant	0.12	0.13		0.11	0.13	
Catholic	0.22	0.12		0.21	0.12	
Other religion	0.36	0.14	**	0.34	0.14	*
Education						
Less than high school	−0.21	0.25		−0.22	0.25	
High school	−0.38	0.16	*	−0.39	0.17	*
Some college	−0.13	0.16		−0.12	0.16	
BA	−0.08	0.16		−0.07	0.16	
Post-grad (omitted)						
Income	0.05	0.02	**	0.05	0.02	**
Race						
Non-Hispanic White (omitted)						
Non-Hispanic Black	0.23	0.10	*	0.25	0.11	*
Non-Hispanic Asian	0.02	0.12		0.00	0.12	
Non-Hispanic other race	0.95	0.60		0.92	0.59	
Hispanic	0.08	0.11		0.08	0.11	
Native-born	−0.56	0.13	***	−0.54	0.13	***
Female	−0.19	0.09	*	−0.17	0.09	
Age	−0.01	0.00	***	−0.01	0.00	***
Urbanicity	0.05	0.04		0.05	0.04	
/cut 1	−2.26	0.49		−2.25	0.51	
/cut 2	−0.14	0.50		−0.12	0.51	
N		3997			3997	

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

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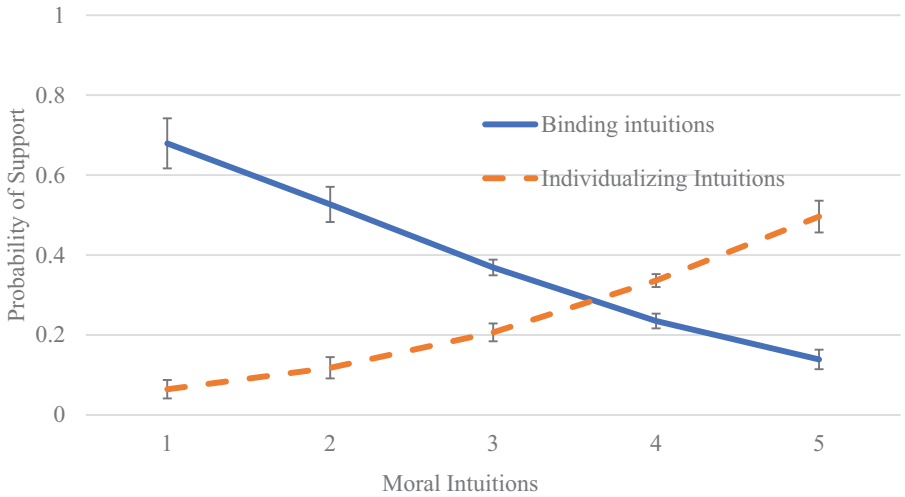


FIGURE 2 | Probability of Support For Increased Immigration.

loyalty was not statistically significant (and it is negative). Both care and fairness were positively associated with support for immigration. Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of individualizing and binding moral intuitions based on the results in Model 1. Like Figure 1, it shows that respondents who score higher on binding intuitions are less supportive of increasing immigration, while those who score higher on individualizing intuitions are more supportive of increasing immigration.

The association between the control variables and support for increases in immigration were once again as expected, with conservatives, the native-born, and older Americans less supportive of immigration than liberals, foreign-born individuals, and younger respondents.

Table 4 shows the association between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes broken out by nativity and race/ethnicity. It provides partial support for H3, as results indicate that the direction and significance of the associations between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes are, on the whole, similar across groups, though the magnitude of the associations vary, and the difference in magnitudes is sometimes statistically significant. Across most groups, the binding intuition is associated with less support for immigration, while the individualizing intuition is associated with more support. There are a few exceptions: the binding intuition is not statistically significant among the foreign-born and African Americans in modeling immigration as a human right, though, as hypothesized, it is negatively associated with support for increases in immigration among both groups. Though in the latter models, it still should be noted that the negative association between binding intuitions and support for increases in immigration is stronger among White than Black Americans. Among the foreign-born, the individualizing intuition is not linked to support for increased levels of immigration, though it is associated with support for immigration as a human right. In the latter case, while individualizing intuitions are associated with support for immigration as a human right among both the native- and foreign-born populations, the magnitude of the association is stronger among the native-born.

There is some variation in the magnitude and statistical significance of the coefficients of the component moral intuition variables and immigration, though the associations are generally consistent across groups. For example, Authority is negatively associated with support for immigration in 10 of the 12 models, while Fairness and Care are positively associated with support for immigration in nine and eight models, respectively. There are also relatively few statistically significant differences in these association between the foreign-born and the native-born and between Whites and other racial/ethnic groups.

5 | Discussion

Attitudes toward immigration are often shaped by the extent to which people perceive it as a threat (Fussell 2014; Taniguchi 2021; Berg 2015). Yet recent research shows that such perceptions vary not only between race/ethnicity and nativity groups, but also within them (e.g., Atac et al. 2025; Enos and Gidron 2018). Our analysis builds on these studies by examining the role of moral intuitions in shaping these perceptions. Using US data from a national YouGov survey of 4000 respondents, we examined the associations between individualizing and binding intuitions and attitudes toward immigration, including views on whether immigration should be considered a human right and preferences for increasing or decreasing immigration levels. We also examined whether the role of these intuitions differ by nativity and race/ethnicity.

Consistent with the predictions of MFT, we found that individuals with stronger individualizing intuitions were more supportive of immigration while those with stronger binding intuitions were less supportive. Among the individualizing intuitions, higher levels of *care* and *fairness* were both associated with greater support for immigration. This suggests that individuals with stronger care intuitions—marked by compassion and concern for the well-being of the less fortunate—were more inclined to support helping immigrants seek a better life (Pantoja 2006). Those with stronger fairness intuitions may be motivated by a

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TABLE 4 | Regressions predicting support for immigration by nativity and race/ethnicity.

Panel A. OLS predicting support for immigration as a human right

	Native-born			Foreign-born				White			Black				Asian				Hispanic			
	Coeff	SE		Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE		Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE		
Moral intuitions																						
Binding	−0.28	0.06	***	−0.04	0.10		a	−0.29	0.08	***	−0.05	0.08		a	−0.16	0.07	*	a	−0.21	0.08	**	
Loyalty	0.19	0.05	***	0.30	0.10	**		0.17	0.08	*	0.34	0.07	***		0.22	0.09	*		0.09	0.09		
Authority	−0.38	0.06	***	−0.32	0.12	***		−0.42	0.08	***	−0.22	0.10	*	a	−0.36	0.10	***		−0.25	0.10	*	
Sanctity	−0.13	0.06	*	−0.06	0.10			−0.07	0.07		−0.28	0.09	**		−0.08	0.08			−0.09	0.10		
Individualizing	0.72	0.06	***	0.52	0.10	***	a	0.70	0.08	***	0.51	0.09	***	a	0.54	0.09	***	a	0.73	0.08	***	
Care	0.44	0.06	***	0.16	0.15		a	0.36	0.08	***	0.36	0.10	***		0.48	0.11	***		0.50	0.09	***	
Fairness	0.31	0.06	***	0.44	0.12	***		0.36	0.08	***	0.30	0.10	**		0.09	0.11		a	0.25	0.11	*	
N	3110				890				995			993				969				1000		

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; a = significant difference at $p < 0.05$ between native- and foreign-born or between each racial/ethnic group and White respondents.

Panel B. Ordered logistic regression predicting support for an increase in immigration

	Native-born			Foreign-born				White			Black				Asian				Hispanic			
	Coeff	SE		Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE		Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE			Coeff	SE		
Moral intuitions																						
Binding	−0.65	0.09	***	−0.52	0.17	**		−0.72	0.13	***	−0.38	0.12	**	a	−0.73	0.14	***		−0.43	0.13	**	a
Loyalty	−0.03	0.08		0.06	0.17			−0.12	0.12		0.08	0.10			−0.07	0.17			0.08	0.12		
Authority	−0.47	0.11	***	−0.40	0.21			−0.54	0.15	***	−0.22	0.16			−0.31	0.18	*		−0.25	0.15		
Sanctity	−0.19	0.09	*	−0.22	0.19			−0.10	0.12		−0.35	0.13	**		−0.34	0.16			−0.27	0.14		
Individualizing	0.70	0.10	***	0.32	0.19		a	0.69	0.15	***	0.35	0.14	*	a	0.86	0.17	***		0.54	0.13	***	
Care	0.32	0.10	**	−0.17	0.22		a	0.26	0.14		0.38	0.16	*		0.29	0.18			0.30	0.15	*	
Fairness	0.41	0.11	***	0.56	0.22	*		0.48	0.15	**	0.07	0.16			0.60	0.20	**		0.27	0.17		
N	3107			890				995			993				969				999			

Note: Models include all independent variables shown in Tables 2 and 3. As in those tables, the binding and individualizing summary intuitions are modeled separately from the component items (i.e., Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity, Care, and Fairness). Significance of the differences in the effects of intuitions across groups (denoted by "a") is determined in models with interactions between intuitions and these groups. a = significant difference between native- and foreign-born or between each racial/ethnic group and White respondents.

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

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desire to provide fair opportunities for people to improve their circumstances (Kukathas 2004).

Of the three binding intuitions, higher levels of *sanctity* and especially *authority* were associated with lower support for immigration. The third, *loyalty*, was not significantly associated with support for increased immigration and, contrary to expectations, was positively associated with support for immigration as a human right. However, this positive association emerged only in the full models. This suggests that the unexpected pattern may be due to the high correlations among the three binding intuitions, which range from 0.62 to 0.69 for each of the pairs. Individuals high in sanctity might oppose immigration because they perceive immigrants as culturally different or as threats to social cohesion (Buckler et al. 2009; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Hellwig and Sinno 2017; Kusow and DeLisi 2021; Lu and Nicholson-Crotty 2010; Malhotra et al. 2013). Those high on authority may view immigration—and especially illegal immigration—as a violation of the rule of law (The Heritage Foundation 2021; Mortensen 2012). They may also associate immigration with crime, despite evidence that in the US, immigration is weakly and negatively associated with crime (Ousey and Kubrin 2018). The finding that sanctity, but not loyalty, predicts opposition to immigration suggests that attitudes may be driven more by fear of outsiders corrupting the dominant culture than by loyalty to in-group members.

The association between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes was similarly strong regardless of whether respondents were asked about whether immigration is a human right or whether they preferred more or less immigration. While we expected the explicit moral framing of the first question to yield a stronger link with moral intuitions, both questions appeared to elicit similar moral responses—perhaps because immigration is currently such a prominent and politicized issue that people tend to interpret its various facets using the same underlying moral lens.

Finally, the association between moral intuitions and immigration attitudes varied in a few instances by nativity and race/ethnicity, though typically not in dramatically different ways (such as a flip in the direction of the association). For instance, binding intuitions were associated with less support for increases in immigration among both the native- and foreign-born, but more strongly among the former. Our findings suggest that such intuitions are sometimes influenced by group position, but not overwhelmingly so.

Our results are generally consistent with previous studies linking moral intuitions and immigration attitudes (Grover et al. 2019; McDonald and Ryan 2019; Captari et al. 2019; Nath et al. 2022; Dražanová and Ruhs 2025). However, these earlier studies often relied on small, non-representative samples, tended to examine a limited set of moral foundations and possible cofounders, or examined niche immigration policies, such as procedural fairness in asylum cases. In contrast, our study draws on a nationally representative sample and includes controls for a wide array of factors known to influence general attitudes toward immigration, including political ideology, race, nativity, and education. This allowed us to more precisely identify the specific moral intuitions that matter: both care and fairness within the individualizing domain and authority and sanctity within the binding domain. Notably, the consistently strong effect of authority suggests that concerns about immigration as a challenge to law and order play a significant role in shaping opposition to immigration.

These strong associations between immigration attitudes and moral intuitions are consistent with broader trends in US public opinion on immigration. Through the 2010s, support for immigration reached historically high levels, coinciding with a period when Social Justice concerns (associated with individualizing intuitions) were prominent in public discourse—reflected in media focus on issues such as racial inequality and sexual harassment (Rozado et al. 2023). Immigration was often framed through a similar moral lens. However, attitudes shifted sharply in the early 2020s, with a notable increase in the number of Americans expressing less support for immigration (Kustov 2024; Jones 2024). Moral intuitions likely played a role in this shift. It is unlikely that individuals' underlying moral frameworks changed (such as their general level of concern with loyalty or harm); rather, the dramatic surge in immigration during this period (Congressional Budget Office 2025; Warren 2024) likely activated binding concerns among many people already holding such intuitions. Polling data indicated that immigration was among Americans' top concerns leading into the 2024 election (Leonhardt and Sun 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, our findings suggest that research informed by Group Threat Theory—whether in the domains of immigration, racial attitudes, criminal justice, or labor market competition, should consider the role of moral intuitions in shaping both the intensity and variability of perceived threat. Our findings are consistent with recent studies that show that even within majority and minority groups, threat responses are far from uniform, as individuals exposed to the same group-based structural conditions vary widely in whether they interpret immigration as a danger (Atac et al. 2025; Enos and Gidron 2018). Indeed, our findings indicate that moral intuitions can lead both native- and foreign-born individuals, as well as people from a variety of racial and ethnic groups, to support or oppose immigration depending on those intuitions.

Our study has a few limitations. First, it is based on cross-sectional data, so we use caution in making causal inferences. In addition, the data were collected in 2023, when concerns with immigration were generally high. Future work should examine whether the patterns found in our analysis hold over time. Third, we analyzed attitudes toward two aspects of immigration policy, though it would be useful for future work to consider additional measures, such as attitudes toward illegal immigration and the deportation of immigrants.

In conclusion, our study finds that moral intuitions are strongly associated with attitudes toward immigration, offering insight into why group threat resonates more with some people than others. Those with strong binding intuitions—particularly an emphasis on authority and sanctity—are less likely to view immigration as a human right and more likely to support lower levels of immigration. In contrast, those with strong individualizing intuitions—including a concern for care and fairness—are more likely to see immigration as a human right and to favor increased immigration. These patterns suggest that the moral

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foundations people prioritize play a meaningful role in shaping their immigration attitudes. As such, efforts to understand or influence public opinion on immigration may benefit from taking these underlying moral frameworks into account.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Moral foundations theorists have suggested the possibility of a sixth foundation, liberty, which emphasizes abuses of power; however, this relatively new foundation was not included in the survey on which the current study is based (Graham et al. 2013).

[2] Although respondents were recruited into the sample based on a screening question on race (to ensure that the sample included at least 1000 White, Black, Latino, and Asian respondents), we recoded race based on responses to a question on racial/ethnic origin in the regular questionnaire, where responses sometimes differed from those given to the screening question.

[3] A Brant test confirmed that our models do not violate the proportional odds of assumption of ordered logistic regression (Wald $p = 0.75$).

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